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AUTHOR Pierog, John J.
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ABSTRACT

A sample group of 40 financial aid applicants, equally divided between students of high socioeconomic background and low socioeconomic background, were surveyed to determine whether there was a significant difference between groups with respect to their perception of the college environment. High socioeconomic status students were defined as those who reported a family income of $20,000 and over. Low socioeconomic status students were those who reported a family income from $0-$7,499. The Community Scale of the College and University Environment Scales was the instrument for measurement. The conclusion was that there is no significant difference between high and low socioeconomic status students in their sense of community with respect to their college environment. The sample population was also broken into subgroups to compare perception of male/female, high socioeconomic male/low socioeconomic male, and high socioeconomic female/low socioeconomic female. No significant difference with relation to "sense of community" was found between subgroups. (AH)

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The Effects of Socioeconomic Background On Students' Perception of Their College Environment

by
John J. Pierog M.Ed.
York College of Pennsylvania

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title.....1

Statement of the Problem.....1

Hypothesis.....1

Background and Significance of the Study.....1

Definition of Terms.....5

Limitations of the Study.....6

Basic Assumptions.....6

Procedure for Collecting Data.....7

Procedure for Treatment of the Data.....7

Data Resulting from the Study.....7

Conclusions & Significance.....8

Residual Findings..... 9

Further Studies.....10

Bibliography.....12

1. Title

The research practicum is entitled "The Effects of Socioeconomic Background on Students' Perception of Their College Environment".

2. Statement of the Problem

The problem asks the questions, "Do students of high socioeconomic status perceive the college environment differently than students of low socioeconomic status?"

3. Hypothesis

The hypothesis postulates that there is no significant difference in college environmental perceptions between students of high socioeconomic status and students of low socioeconomic status.

4. Background and Significance of the Study

York College of Pennsylvania is a four year college with both Associates and Bachelors Degree programs. It was previously York Junior College. The college program was established to meet the educational needs of the greater York community.

The enrollment figure for the current academic year approaches 2900 full and part time students, with 60% of all full time students being non-commuters. (This non-commuting status raises their cost of Education approximately $1200.00.) In the past 10 years, ten new buildings have been errected, including four dormitories. Projected enrollment figures indicate that this growth trend is beginning to level off.

At an earlier period of time it may have been said that, only students with adequate financial funds were able to attend college. Today, that statement is less accurate. Federal financial aid programs administered through the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare contribute over $60,000. in direct institutional funds to assist needy students at York College

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of Pennsylvania. In addition to that, the Federally funded Basic Educational Opportunity Grant Program has funded over $46,000. and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has contributed $344,000. direct grant assistance to York College students. State Guarantee Loan programs, and private and institutional scholarships round off the total financial aid directly available to York College students to approximately one million dollars. Nearly 65% of the student body are eligible and receiving some form of financial aid.

When considering that in 1974, the student body has increased, and that 60% are individuals from outside the York area with 65% of its population dependent on financial aid, it seems correct to assume that the composition of the student body has significantly changed.

It is necessary to note that this shift in population respective of student socioeconomic background is not unique to York College alone. After the establishment of the three basic federal financial aid programs; Educational Opportunity Grant Program, National Defense Student Loan Program, and College Work-Study Program, during the time period of 1964-1967, qualified needy students have been taking advantage of financial aid programs available for them. Charles A. Quattlebaum (1968), who prepared a government handbook for the Office of Education, reports some 800,000 students qualified and received some form of federal financial aid during the fiscal year 1967. In the seven years since that report, total expenditures for federal financial programs have consistently increased.

In a study conducted by W. Lee Hansen (1969), it was explained that during the 1960's higher education had become to be increasingly viewed as a "right" rather than a privilege. In the examination of expenditures for federal financial aid programs for the fiscal year 1968, he stated that approximately 63% of all students enrolled in colleges and universities throughout the United States received some form of federal money. Approximately 40% of these

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funds were extended in the form of non-repayable grant money for the neediest students. Also, according to his study the total dollar amount of these funds approached the 1.4 billion dollar figure. It would certainly seem that for this amount of money to become available within such a short period of five years to assist needy students, that the socioeconomic status of a student body would be so effected.

In a report by Ernst Becker (1969), for the Office of Education, it is stated that from 1960-1967 College and University enrollments increased from 3.7 million to 6.4 million students. He attributes this in part to federal financial aid programs. Another factor which must also be considered is the tremendous increase of the college age population. That was probably the most significant reason for this increase.

The United States Senate passed a Labor-Health, Education, and Welfare appropriation bill, as reported in Higher Education and National Affairs, approving over 1.8 billion dollars for the federal financial aid programs for the 1975 fiscal year. The sentiment of the Congress is that the entire appropriation will be approved.

It may be assumed that without these funds available, a large number of students would not have been able to attend a college or university. (The stipulation for federal grant money is that it may be disbursed only to students who would not be able to attend without it.)

Has the overall student attitude and perception been so effected by this change in gross student socioeconomic background? Hansens' (1969) report studies this possibility. He states that attitudinal differences which exist between high and low income students is negligable. He does suspect that socioeconomic background would have a strong effect on student perception.

When considering the importance of this entire subject, it must be accepted that if student perception is directly related to socioeconomic back-

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ground, the differences in perception may influence students' performance in other areas. For example, Keith Manning (1968), of Indiana University, investigated student perception of college environment and its relationship to academic achievement and personal development. In this study, it is concluded that the changes in perception of first semester students were negatively correlated with their first semester grade point average.

In returning to the subject under discussion, John F. Delaney (1971) of Rutgers University published a paper which revealed that students from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds did have significantly different environmental perceptions; though patterns of differences were not consistent.

A study by Lincoln H. Hall (1968) concluded that freshmen from different socioeconomic backgrounds are distinquishable in areas of personality and attitudes measures.

In order to begin the conclusion of the background and significance of the study, consideration must be given to some basic facts that have been established. The first fact is that in the past ten years the federal financial aid program has expanded and allowed a significant number of students to attend post-secondary educational institutions. As a result of this, students who might not have attended college or universities because of low socioeconomic backgrounds are now doing so. This situation exists for colleges and universities throughout the United States. Has the change in composition of student body effected the group environmental perception?

In more specific terms, it is the purpose of this study to deal with this situation as it exists at York College, in one area of environment-community.

Through the result of this study the Student Affairs Division of York College would be more aware of the implications which student socioeconomic background plays on the environment which they seek to foster. This study

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could feasibly effect not only orientation programs, but resident hall programs as well. If the Student Affair staff is to remain true to its purpose in being aware of student needs, and meeting these needs to the best of their ability, this study may be one of many conducted in this area.

Though the significance of this practicum may be quite modest in the sense of educational impact, it is nevertheless of importance to York College.

If any educator might use the results of this study to further stress the importance of student affairs and/or college environment, then it has revealed its importance to others.

5. Definition of Terms

The following items are defined for the purpose of the study.

a) College and University Environment Scales-Designed by Robert Pace in 1963. It is a test specifically designed to measure student perception of the environment at a given college or university.

b) Community-an environmental factor which is sympathetic and supportive, in which group welfare and loyalty are of the essence.

c) Control Variable-socioeconomic status, marital status, sex, year in college, and age.

d) Dependent variable-the environmental perception relative to community.

e) Direct Institutional funds-funds administered to students through the financial aid office of the institutions.

f) High socioeconomic status-family income level of $20,000.00 and over.

g) Independent, variable-the socioeconomic status.

h) Intervening variables-values of the individual, resident status, social sensitivity and awareness, ability to be congenial, and prior experience in educational communities.

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i) Low socioeconomic status-family income level $0.00 through $7,499.00.

j) Non-commuters-students who reside in college-owned housing or in apartments or private homes in the vacinity of the college.

6. Limitations of the Study

a) Sample selected from restricted population--financial aid applicants.

b) A relatively small sample (40).

c) The intervening variables and basic assumptions will certainly influence the accuracy and validity of the study.

d) The effectiveness of the scale being utilized for this study.

7. Basic Assumptions

a) It is assumed that the composition of the study body has changed with respect to student socioeconomic status since the enactment of federal and state aid programs.

b) It is assumed that the students selected for this study will accurately report their responses.

c) It is assumed that the scale requiring student responses is worded such that the student may easily decide his correct response.

d) A further assumption is that the limitations of the study as previously stated will not adversely effect the results.

e) It is assumed that the students selected have had ample experience in the college community to warrant their responses.

f) Another assumption is that though students of high socioeconomic status submitted a Parents Confidential Statement, it is not indicative of extraordinary family circumstances.

g) The final assumption is that this study is of significant importance to warrant the time and effort expended in carrying it out.

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8. Procedure for Collecting Data

a) The study will compare students of high socioeconomic status and students of low socioeconomic status with respect to their sense of community by administering the community scale from the College and University Environment Scales to each group.

b) The study will use current York College financial aid statistics to identify a group of students--the upper and lower 16% of students who applied for and received financial aid--exactly 40 students.

c) The 40 students will be sent a letter from the financial aid office signifying the importance of the study and asking for their cooperation. (Sample letter included in appendix)--100% response is expected.

9. Procedure for Treatment of the Data

Pace (1963) suggests a scoring procedure which will be followed in order to obtain the means of the raw score.

a) Null Hypothesis H_o: $X_1 = X_2$

b) Alternate Hypothesis H_a: $X_1 \neq X_2$

c) Level of Significance $\alpha = .05$

d) Critical -t- Value ± 2.02 (two tailed test)

H_o will be rejected and H_a accepted if $t \geq +2.02$ or ≤ -2.02.

10. Data Resulting from the Study

The following is that data resulting from the study.

Table I

	Group I (High Income)	Group II (Low Income)
Mean	11.3	12.15
S.D.	2.079	2.300
Variance	4.322	5.290

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Table II

Critical t	Calculated t
±2.021	-1.225

Table I records the mean, standard deviation and variance of Groups I & II.

Table II records the critical t and the calculated t.

The null hypothesis cannot be rejected. There is no significant difference in the perception of the college environment between Group I and Group II.

II. Conclusions and Significance

a) The data clearly indicates that there is no significant difference between high socioeconomic status students, and low socioeconomic status students in their perception of the college environment.

b) Implications for York College--

1) The socioeconomic status of students presently enroiled at this institution cannot be related to attitudinal differences regarding their sense of community with respect to the college.

2) Implementation of student programs, and/or activities for the purpose of fostering the sense of community within the student body cannot be based on the socioeconomic status changes of said group.

c) Implications for other institutions concerned with attitudinal differences of students with regard to their college environment--

1) Being aware of the limitations of this study, it would be necessary to state that change in the socioeconomic status of a student body does not effect their sense of community with respect to their college environment.

d) Limitations of the study--

1) The sample has been selected from a restricted population--financial aid applicants.

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2) Relatively small sample (40).

3) Intervening variables -- values of the individual, resident status, social sensitivity and awareness, ability to be congenial, and prior experiences with educational communities.

12. Residual Findings

The following data is incidental to the research. A comparison was made with subgroups in the selected population.

Table I

	Group I (all male)	Group II (all female)
Mean	11.1	12.350
S.D.	1.447	2.661
Variance	2.093	7.080

Table II

critical t	calculated t
$t = \pm 2.021$	$t = -1.845$

Table III

	Group III (high socio-economic male)	Group IV (low socio-economic male)
Mean	11.200	11.000
S.D.	1.475	1.490
Variance	2.175	2.220

Table IV

critical t	calculated t
$t = \pm 2.101$	$t = .3015$

Table V

	Group V (high socioeconomic female)	Group VI (low socioeconomic female)
Mean	11.400	13.3
S.D.	2.633	2.451
Variance	6.932	6.007

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Table VI

critical t	calculated t
±2.101	-1.669

Discussion

The preceeding tables indicate that even within subgroups there is no significant difference with relation to "sense of community". When a comparison is made regarding all male and all female students, Groups I and II, though there is no significant difference we see that there is a negative tendency, but it must be emphasized that this is only a tendency. It might be expected that both groups would be equally as satisfied, however, the finding reports that group II was apparently somewhat more satisfied with their environment.

It is also interesting to note that there is that same negative tendency when comparing groups V and VI - high socioeconomic females and low socioeconomic females.

13. Further studies

Other studies which may be entered into regarding this question remain numerous. It would be interesting to conduct this same study on a larger campus where a larger number of students could be sampled. It would also be interesting to conduct this same research again, after these students have experienced more of the college environment. Perhaps during some time in their sophomore or junior year. The experiences of this group, or lack of it, at this particular time may certainly have had effects on this study. Effects of the intervening variables may play more of an importance than is thought. Perhaps if the study could be conducted where groups could be matched with regard to their residence status for instance, a further difference in the results would appear.

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It would certainly seem important that further research in this area of student perception is necessary. A more positive student percention of the college environment is of the essence in the development of a more healthy and satisfied student body and institution.

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